

UNDER DEVELOPMENT

No kidding

Small children and expensive bits of kit don't mix, as David Robinson discovers when he finds his four-year-old grandson isn't quite ready to join the family firm

The saying 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it' is one of which I'm quite fond. I've dealt with hundreds of incidents over the years that could have easily been avoided if only the custard had followed that dictum.

One thing round here that didn't need fixing was Mrs R's HP LaserJet 1320. Grandson Aidan, who's four, can now open all the office doors by himself and, when he visits, wanders around as if he owns the place. Maybe one day he will. Recently he visited our workshop and pestered engineer Garry for a while. When he came back he pointed to my desk and asked, "What's that?" – the 'that' being a screwdriver. Shortly afterwards, there came a horrible rasping from the laser printer. Aidan was standing there, screwdriver in hand, looking sheepish.

The only way to stop the racket was to turn off the power. When asked what he'd done, Aidan resorted to a small child's standard defence and burst into tears. We reassured him that he was not in trouble, but told him we did need to know what he'd done. When he'd calmed down, he showed me how he'd 'fixed' the printer by poking the screwdriver into the cooling fan vent. That really had fixed it.

Garry dismantled the printer and found the noise was caused by the cooling fan having lost a blade courtesy of the unscheduled interaction with screwdriver. The fan unit pushes into a plastic housing and, once in place, is a loose fit. Having lost the blade, it was rattling around at high frequency, making a noise out of all proportion to the damage and the size of the fan. The fix was a new fan that cost a tenner from www.cpc.co.uk.

THE GOG DELUSION

Of course, there are plenty of things that, while not 'broke', are in need of some kind of fix. If things had never been improved on, we'd all still be wandering around wearing animal skins like the Gogs, eating berries with our bare hands because nobody had recognised the benefits of a bow and arrow. In computing terms, we'd still be using CPM and transferring files with the awful



peripheral interchange program (PIP). Digital Research would be king of the operating system hill and the late Gary Kildall would have been a million times richer than Bill Gates. What a world that would be.

By the way, the Gogs are Aidan's favourite cartoon, featuring prehistoric people who never speak properly but just grunt (rather like teenagers). See www.toonhound.com/gogs.htm if you're not already an aficionado.

Incidentally, if you want the low-down on how MS-DOS became the predominant PC operating system instead of the then-market leader CPM, see www.cadigital.com/kildall.htm, which has a fair rendition of the story and is much more informative than the content on Wikipedia. The site also reports that when MS-DOS was completed, Microsoft "submitted a copy to IBM for testing, who found over 300 bugs". Clearly, they started as they meant to go on.

SQL NEEDS A SEQUEL

One Microsoft product that needs fixing is SQL Server Express. What a memory hog! We're evaluating a new accounting system called Interprise Suite, which uses MS SQL Server (either the 'real' one or the Express version, depending on how many users you need) as its back-end database. For our own custom applications, we mostly use a SQL database called Nexus (www.nexusdb.com).

If these products were people, Nexus would be Kelly Holmes (slim and fast, consuming under 10MB of RAM while giving access to more than 10 databases) and SQL Server Express would be what you'd get from crossing Rick Waller with Anne Diamond. If you want the computer equivalent of 'who ate all the pies?' then SQL Express is the product for you. To do the same job as Nexus, it consumes anywhere between 54 and 250MB of RAM on my PC, depending on how hungry it is.

AT YOUR COMMAND

I should stop. Knocking Microsoft is poor sport and, in fairness, when fixing stuff it sometimes does a great job. Like a lot of old timers, I often prefer to do many system administration tasks using the command-line interface (Start, Run, type cmd and press Enter). For repetitive tasks, you can string commands together to form scripts, also known as batch files, as you submit the batch of commands for processing. Renaming a bunch of files, say, is much easier this way than trying (and failing) with the miserable Windows Explorer.

But the command-line interface is as old as the hills, going back to the times before even Windows 3.0, when Gates was worth just a billion or so. It's not broken, just well past its sell-by date. Microsoft has rectified this with the introduction of PowerShell, a new scripting language that works on XP,

Windows Server 2003 and Vista. If you compare any Windows variants with Unix, you'll find the latter offers the systems administrator a richer set of tools for automating complex maintenance tasks. The more complex the task, the more you want to automate so, once a routine is sorted, there's less chance of making a mistake. PowerShell addresses this weakness.

As a language, it looks like any of the C variants (particularly C#) and also bears a resemblance to Perl and PHP. What can you use it for? How about moving large numbers of files older than a certain date from multiple file folders to one or more archive folders? Or managing RSS newsfeeds? Or automating regular Windows Explorer tasks using COM? There's no end to what you can do with PowerShell. It's a free download from <http://tinyurl.com/yk5h8l>. However, you will also need to have the .NET framework installed to run it.

PowerShell in Action by Bruce Payette (see www.drsexon.co.uk for a review) will introduce you to what you can do with PowerShell and how to go about it.

FINAL NAIL IN THE COFFIN

Recently a customer had an old PC he wanted to scrap. It had a copy of his accounts system on it and he was concerned about security. How could he ensure that the recycle centre staff couldn't extract this information?

One sure-fire way, I told him, was to drive a six-inch nail through the hard disk; it's quicker than doing a low-level format. So he did just that. Two days later, he asked if it would be possible to recover a copy of the accounts. He'd forgotten to take an archive copy before driving home the nail, and his original backup was unreadable. Moral: test that backups can be restored before you trust them. And add another saying to the collection: look before you leap. **CS**

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